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U.S. team begins collecting, testing spy dust samples in Moscow

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MOSCOW — A team of U.S. experts yesterday began collecting samples to determine how widely chemical trackers may have been used on American personnel here.

Meanwhile in Washington, a congressman said that the State Department has strong "indications" that spy dust may have been used by Soviet agents in the United States as well and that the persons most affected by the possible health hazard of the powder were not the American targets but the Soviet trackers.

"I've been given a blank check to investigate this," the team's leader, Dr. Ernest McConnell, told a meeting of American residents in Moscow.

Pledging to "leave no door unopened," members of the four-person team said they would spend between one and two weeks in Moscow and Leningrad, taking samples from the homes, offices and vehicles of American diplomats and journalists.

A decision to send the investigative team was made after the State Department charged a week ago that the KGB had used a possibly cancer-causing chemical known as nitrophenol-pentadiene to monitor the movements of Americans and their Soviet contacts.

Soviet authorities categorically deny the charge.

The team of experts from the National Institutes of Health and the Environmental Protection Agency arrived here late yesterday, equipped with a Polaroid camera, 530 vials,

and hundreds of jars and trash bags to collect the samples.

Dr. McConnell said "initial answers" about the extent of the spy dust use — and potential health hazards — should "be at hand."

Richard Combs, the U.S. charge d'affaires, said the only way the Americans know to detect the spy dust — a white-yellowish substance that resembles roach powder — is through a mass spectrograph.

"There's got to be another way," he said, because the KGB could not be expected to use a spectrograph, a computer-enhanced instrument so bulky and expensive that even the probe team did not bring one in.

U.S. officials have not revealed how they learned about the alleged KGB use of the spy dust on Americans.

Members of the probe team said yesterday that it was fair to assume that much of the alleged spy dust would by now have been removed from the cars and homes of the Americans. At the same time, they said they did not know exactly what the removal techniques were.

"There are indications it has been used outside Moscow, in the United States," Representative Daniel A. Mica, D-Fla., chairman of the House Foreign Affairs International operations subcommittee, told a news conference. "I have been told there is one highly possible use in the United States."

He said the State Department did not give him any details of where and when the chemical may have been used and for what reason.

He said that the only reason the

United States discovered this spring that the Soviets had begun to use the tracking substance heavily was that the Soviets "made a mistake" and applied so much of the chemical at an unidentified site that the powder became visible.

Mr. Mica said he was told yesterday by Dr. Charles Brodine, the State Department's chief medical adviser, that there is a "very low probability" that the health of any U.S. personnel in Moscow has been adversely affected by ingesting or inhaling the substance or by absorbing it through the skin.

"The bad news is that the individuals at highest risk would be the Soviet agents that have been applying this substance, apparently in the form of an aerosol," he said.